DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 156 930 CG 012 516

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TITLE Covert Sexism in the Study of Suicide.
PUB DATE 5 Sep 77
NOTE 23p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bias; *Females; Literature Reviews; Marriage; Role Conflict; *Sex Differences; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Role; Social Isolation; *Social Science Research; Social Status; *Suicide

ABSTRACT

The sociological study of suicide has suffered from a lack of knowledge about women in society. Data regarding women's participation in the labor force and in marriage have been lacking, overlooked, poorly analyzed statistically, and misunderstood. When data on women have not reflected suicide theory based on male rates, female suicide has been treated as if it were a deviant kind of suicide behavior. Suicide theory has been distorted by this general lack of knowledge, as can be shown by a review of major works in the sociology of suicide. However, now that a better understanding of women is available to theorists, including more sophisticated knowledge about the socialization of women and the status of women in the work force and in marriage, it is possible to gain new insights into the suicidal behavior of women. This should further theortical understanding of all suicide behavior. (Author)

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COVERT SEXISM IN THE STUDY OF SUICIDE

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CG 012516

COVERT SEXISM IN THE STUDY OF SUICIDE

Sociological theories of suicide do not explain the suicide rates of women. Current suicide theory, following Durkheim's lead, states that suicide occurs in a state of anomie and/or under the conditions of social isolation. Maris (1969) summed up the research on suicide by stating that Durkheim was essentially correct in his theory of suicide. Maris proposed using the inverse relationship between suicide and social control as a basis for a systematic theory of suicide. It is implicit in the theories reviewed in this paper, however, that women do not commit suicide when there is a state of anomie. The research suggests that the opposite is true, that women commit suicide when social control is high.

The reason current theory does not describe suicide rates of women is because the sociological study of suicide has suffered from a lack of knowledge about women in society. Data on women have sometimes been ignored, they have been poorly analyzed statistically, women have been misunderstood regarding labor force participation and participation in marriage. When data on women have not reflected suicide theory based on male suicide rates, female suicide has been treated as if it were a different form of suicide behavior.

This paper reviews the development of suicide theory to demonstrate how the lack of understanding about female suicide has distorted the findings of suicide research. The purpose of the review is to demonstrate that if suicide theory is to be a general statement of social behavior, it requires revision to take into account the suicide patterns of women. A more thorough treatment of women in suicide research should have significant influence in the development of a sociological theory of suicide.

Durkheim's Theories of Suicide

Durkheim originally provided examples of high suicide rates in women when social control is high. He treated his findings about women as exceptions to his general theory. He then ignored his findings on women. This occurred in both his discussion of egoism and in his discussion of anomie. Three examples make clear the treatment given women in Durkheim's analysis (1951).

In his theory of egoism, Durkheim wished to demonstrate that family life provided a cohesive group for the individual, a group which tied the individual into society and its systems of control. Married persons were a part of a cohesive group. Widows and widowers were also protected somewhat from suicide because they had once belonged to a cohesive family group. Single adults, having no family ties, were much more likely to suffer from a concern only for self. Findings which support Durkheim's theory show that men who are married or who are widowers have lower suicide rates than single men of the same age. Findings which do not support his theory show that married women without children and widows without children have higher suicide rates than single women. Widows with children have the same suicide rate as single women. Only middle-aged married women with children have a lower suicide rate than single women of the same age. Durkheim concludes that "marriage has indeed a preservative effect of its own against suicide. But it is very limited and also benefits one sex only"(1951: 198).

Durkheim wished to show that close ties to the church were related to low suicide rates. He noted that Catholics committed less

suicide than Protestants and concluded that the greater tendency of Protestants to commit suicide is related to the spirit of free inquiry basic to the Protestant religion. This taste for free inquiry is furthered by education. He noted that women have less education than men and also that women have lower suicide rates than men. He explains that lack of education in women is "fundamentally traditionalist by nature, they govern their conduct by fixed beliefs and have no great intellectual needs" (1951:166). He here implies that the reason women have less education is because of an inherent physical or psychological traditional nature. Durkheim, whose method centered on social facts, in the case of women falls back on psychological reductionism to explain his findings.

Durkheim discussed the effects of anomie on suicide rates of women as a part of his discussion of the relationship between divorce and anomie. He found that divorced persons had higher suicide rates than other groups in the population and that throughout Europe, the number of suicides varied together with the number of divorces. Where the divorce rate was high, suicide rates were high, and where the divorce rate was low, suicide rates were also low. His statistics indicated that divorced persons of both sexes had suicide rates three to four times greater than married persons (1951:262). Durkheim reasoned that marriage is one of society's way of regulating social relationships. Divorce, on the other hand, acts as an open-ended escape clause to the limits marriage provides. Marriage does not profit the man when the limits imposed by marriage may be done away with just for the asking (1951:272).

Durkheim's theory applies only to men. His data show very different findings for women. In countries where the divorce rate is high, the suicide rate for married women is lower than in countries where the divorce rate is low. In other words, the higher the divorce rate, the lower the suicide rate of married women. Durkheim devised the following law: "From the standpoint of suicide, marriage is more favorable to the wife the more widely practiced divorce is and vice versa" (1951:269). Women have high rates of suicide when social control is high. When women are not limited by a strong family institution, and are permitted divorce, suicide rates are lower. Durkheim noted these contraditions, but he did not incorporate his findings into his sociological theory.

The Work of Henry and Short

Henry and Short, in their work Suicide and Homicide (1954), follow Durkheim's lead that social control, or what they prefer to call "external restraint" is inversely related to suicide. However, if data on women are used to test the theory of Henry and Short, the data suggest that suicide in women is not inversely related to external restraint.

Female suicide patterns are different from male patterns. Suicide rates for males in the United States increase with age, and continue to increase into the very highest age brackets. Suicide rates for females, however, usually reach a peak in the 45 - 54 age group or the 55 - 64 age group, and the rate decreases in older age groups. The following examples are analogous to examples used by

Henry and Short to demonstrate that men have increasing suicide rates as social control is reduced. When the same examples are used to understand that curve in the suicide rates of women, it is found that suicide rates of women are reduced as social control is reduced. Henry and Short note that just prior to the peak of the business cycle (1954:62) female suicide rates rise, and suggest it is because females are losing power at this point because men gain more from such prosperous periods than do women. It might also be added that the suicide rate of women is highest at the peak of earning capacity of men, middle age, which provides men power and females restraint. The suicide rate of women goes down at age 65 when men retire and lose power and authority (1954:75). It is also at this time that the family of orientation is dying, (1954:79) reducing that restraint on women.

Each of these examples suggest that the suicide rates of women are reduced when social control is reduced. This is consistent with Durkheim's findings, but is more suggestive of Durkheim's theory of fatalistic suicide than of either egoism or anomie. (Durkheim 1951:276).

Status Integration and Suicide

Gibbs and Martin (1964) provide one of the major modern works on suicide in the field of sociology. They closely follow Durkheim's theory that suicide has an inverse relationship to group integration. Where persons are integrated into the group, their suicide rates are

low, but when persons have conflicting roles in the society, their suicide rates will be higher.

Gibbs and Martin attempted to empirically measure this theory. In doing so, they sought a common denominator to measure social integration. They reasoned that social integration is indicated by stable social relationships. Social relationships are stable when role performance is satisfactory. Role performance is satisfactory when there is little role conflict. Role conflict is least likely to occur when an individual has compatible statuses, or status integration. Therefore, status integration is related to social integration.

Gibbs and Martin selected occupational status to measure status integration "on the grounds that it is perhaps the major or key status of individuals in the United States" (1964:50). They used standard Census Bureau occupational groupings, and found that females showed more integration than males because females are concentrated in fewer occupations than males. They hypothesized that "when comparing males to females, there will be an inverse relationship between measures of occupational integration and suicide rates by race-sex status configurations" (1964:51). They found, by their calculations, that females did have a high measure of occupational integration and low suicide rates, the inverse relationship predicted by the theory.

Methodological problems occur when census categories are used to study occupations of women. The census scale attempts to reflect economic divisions in the male labor force, but female occupations are grouped together because they are held by women. Farmers and farm laborers are carried as two separate categories,

and blue-collar work is divided into craftsmen, operatives, and laborers. But salesworkers, a category which has almost as many women as men, does not have such categories as supervisor, skilled or unskilled. Clerical workers, which includes a heavy concentration of women workers, also does not have hierarchical breakdowns. If the categories were to treat male occupations in the same way as female occupations, then either farm work and blue collar work would not be broken down into skilled and unskilled categories, or else sales workers, clerical workers and service workers would be divided into these categories. Gibbs and Martin state that "one of the most pressing problems in the measurement of status integration lies in the use of data that do not differentiate between statuses" (1964:44). However, as we have recently become aware, status of women and not the status of occupation is the determining factor in evaluating the work women do.

This same problem occurs when using occupations of women as a measure of role conflict. In order to assume that occupations indicate role conflict, it is necessary to assume there is a free movement in and out of the occupational status. Gibbs and Martin state that "the theory is not applicable to configurations of ascribed statuses" (1964:28). If occupation, then, is to be an indicator of role conflict, we must assume that non-white women are concentrated in jobs as service workers because it conflicts less with their other roles, or that white women are concentrated in clerical jobs because there is less role conflict between clerical work and other roles of a white woman. But we have come to realize that it is the status of woman

which permits one to be a wife, a mother, a housekeeper, and/or a clerical worker. Her status of woman will allow her to be a farm laborer but rarely a farm manager, an office laborer but rarely an executive. It is the ascribed status of woman which determines these statuses and not role conflict.

In a later research article, Gibbs and Martin (1974) place less emphasis on the inherent conflict between roles and more emphasis on conforming to "the patterned and socially sanctioned ... demands and expectations" of others (1974:333). In industrial society women primarily play the role of wife, which requires a close relationship with only one other person; the role of mother, which requires a relationship with children until they reach maturity, a period of years which are only a third or a fourth of a woman's life; and the role of housekeeper, which requires no important social interaction. If also a woman is expected to play only a minor role in the urban, industrial economy, then any measure of women in occupations may in fact be a measure of social isolation and not a measure of social integration. Conformity to socially isolating roles is not consistent with Gibbs and Martin's theory of status integration.

Bias in Language

A male-centered viewpoint which leads to considerable confusion is found in Gibbs and Martin as well as in other literature on suicide (see Morselli, 1882; Miner, 1922; Cavan, 1928). This male-centered viewpoint measures female to male suicide ratios but not the ratio of males to females. We are told by Gibbs and Martin that Morselli found the suicide ratio in Switzerland to be 12.2 female

suicides to 100 male suicides, while in Spain the ratio is 28.8 female suicides to 100 male suicides (Morselli, 1882:190). Miner (1922:31) found 177.1 female suicides per 100 male suicides in Bengal. Gibbs and Martin raise the question, "Under what conditions does the female suicide rate approach or even surpass the male rate?" (1964: 175). Mathematically this is perfectly correct, but grammatically and logically it directs the mind to look for explanations in conditions which affect the female only. Because the female rate varies in the mathematical ratios, it is assumed that any explanation must explain the female variation.

However, it must be realized that the male rate is also a variable. This is seen more clearly mathematically if, instead of expressing the sex ratio in Switzerland as 12.2 females to 100 males, it is expressed as a ratio of 100 females to 820 male suicides. In Spain there would be 100 females to 347 male suicides, whereas in Bengal there would be 100 female to 56 male suicides. Logically, the question is "under what condition does the male suicide rate approach or even become less than the female suicide rate." This directs the mind to look for explanations in conditions which effect the male.

Gibbs and Martin treat the male rate as a constant. They hypothesized that in those states, and in those countries where the per cent of females in the labor force is high, the suicide rates of females will tend to be more nearly equal that of males (1964:181). To test their hypothesis, the per cent of males in the labor force and a corresponding per cent of females in the labor force was computed for each state in the United States. This employment ratio was compared

to the suicide ratio in that state. A coefficient of correlation was computed between the two sets of values, and r = .53. They concluded that states "with a small per cent of females in the labor force" (1964:181) have a high suicide sex ratio.

What would be helpful is an explanation of why the correlation exists. It is not known if male participation in the work force corresponds with male suicide rates, or if female participation in the work force corresponds with female suicide rates. It is not known if a high ratio of females in the labor force is due to a high female employment rate or a low male employment rate. It is not known if a high female suicide ratio is due to a high female suicide rate or a low male suicide rate. For example, a very high male employment rate in one area would by comparison show a low ratio of females in the labor force. On the other hand, severe unemployment of males could create a higher ratio of females in the labor force. In fact, the female employment rate in the two areas could be constant. If the highly employed men should also have a slightly higher suicide rate than the less employed men, there is a correlation of the type found by Gibbs and Martin, but female behavior is spurious.

Later research (Newman, Whittemore and Newman, 1973) shows that there is a correlation between the total suicide rate and both male unemployment and female employment. But correlations were not done between the male unemployment rate and male suicide rates, nor between the female unemployment rate and female suicide rates. Female employment has increased from 27 percent in 1940 to 43 percent in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1971) without, so far, a corresponding

increase in the female suicide rate. It is obvious that working is not a cause of suicide. The assumptions made about women in the labor force which leads researchers to compare female labor force participation with suicide rates need careful examination. Nevertheless, this is a promising area for further research.

A major point to this critique is that language does direct mental processes. If language, including mathematical language, always treats the male as a constant, and always treats the female as the variable, thought processes tend to look for variables associated with the female. There is also a tendency to overlook the variables pertaining to the male. However, in most sociological work, variation occurs in both male and female rates, and total variation needs to be considered as such if a thorough analysis of a problem is to be done.

Status integration theory provides an example of how distortions in theory and in research will occur if social scientists do not recognize effects of the lower status of women in the work force. Specifically, it provides an example of errors which occur when the discrimination in employment of women is not taken into account. It also provides an example of errors occurring when social scientists are not aware of the fact that mathematical language can assume that male rates are constant, and that female rates are the important variable.

Modern Marriage and Suicide

Changes have occurred in the sociological literature regarding the value of marriage to both men and women since Durkheim wrote Suicide. Durkheim described marriage as burdensome to the

woman, but men benefited from marriage. While marriage limited men, it was clearly a worthwhile and pleasurable state. His enjoyment was restricted, but it was assured and it was far superior to the humdrum existence of the ordinary bachelor (1951:271).

By the middle of the twentieth century this position was reversed and marriage was seen to benefit women. It was widely assumed, and reflected in the popular culture, that it was plainly to a man's interest to avoid marriage as long as possible, but as plainly to a woman's interest to make a favorable marriage as soon as she can. This bias about the value of marriage has influenced recent suicide theory. The results of such bias can be seen in the work of Warren Breed.

Warren Breed (1967) follows Durkheim's lead that social integration, which provides social control, protects one from suicide. He suggests that social integration for women comes in marriage, and that therefore the loss of a mate will be potentially most damaging to women, whereas it is the social relationships in the job which are most vital to men, and loss of these relationships will be most damaging to men.

Having made these assumptions, Breed refers to his study of 89 New Orleans white females, and relates them to his theory that loss of a man is related to female suicides. In his first category are women who never married, "never even got to know a man well" (1967:192). Only one, a hemophiliac, did not choose to marry. Breed says, "The others probably aspired to marry but were unable to find a man" (1967:192).

His second category consists of "aborted romances." One woman was forty when dating a man who married someone else. Three years later she committed suicide. For what reason is her suicide linked to this particular event in her life, rather than to anything which may have happened to her before or since the incident? Breed also places in this category of aborted romances divorced women because "the unsuccessful search for a second husband can be depressing, too" (1967:193).

The third category is of women who feel their husbands do not love them. One woman's husband was known as an "ogre" to her friends; another woman cried a great deal because her husband kept her "penned up" at home. In one case, drunkenness of the husband contributed to the wife's aggravation, and in a similar case the wife's marital distress was increased by the fact that one son had been sent to jail. Rather than the cause of these suicides being the loss of a husband, the impression is that these women would have been better off without the husband.

The threat of separation creates another category of women who feel loss. Breed suggests as an example of such loss one case where "the man had locked the woman, who drank heavily, out of their house several times" (1967:193). Since alcohol is associated with suicide, this explanation would serve at least as well as the threat of separation. Or Breed could have used in each of his categories the theory that oppressive relationships were related to suicide.

However, there are problems with Breed's methodology which deter the drawing of conclusions. First, we must recognize that such ad hoc explanations are a consistent problem, especially in suicide

research. But Breed's categories are also a problem. Women without male relationships, women with broken relationships, and women who expect a relationship to end, are certainly all-inclusive categories. It would be difficult to imagine a sample of women, suicides or not, who did not fall into one or the other of these categories. To look for evidence among women suicides that they have at some time had a difficult relationship with a man is a foolproof way of verifying a theory.

Bock and Webber's (1972) data conflict with Breed's theory. They, in the tradition of Durkheim, use social isolation as a variable to explain suicide rates in the elderly. They found that the widowed have higher suicide rates than the married, but they could not explain why the suicide rates of widowed women are not higher than the rates of married women. Nor could they explain why widowers, even when not isolated, had higher suicide rates than husbands who were isolated. A theory which dealt with social control, with the social imperative of a man to retire, and the denial of a man's role of provider, could explain why widowers have high rates. Widows, who are not forced to give up their role of homemaker, do not have suicide rates higher than married women.

Discussion

The point of this review of the literature is not to bemoan the neglect or poor analysis of women in these studies. The point of this review is rather that to ignore an analysis of women is to ignore important information which can distort the conclusions of a study. In the study of suicide, not adequately testing theoretical perspectives

with data about women has profoundly distorted suicide theory.

Suicide theorists have supported the idea that social control is inversely related to suicide. They have argued that suicide will occur more frequently when social control is low. Durkheim noted that "egoism" was a concern for self and a lack of integration into the group. This resulted in low social control. "Anomie," a lack of social norms, led to low social control. He argued that both were associated with high rates of suicide. Henry and Short referred to low social control as a lack of "external restraint" and associated this with high suicide rates. Gibbs and Martin used the concept of a lack of "status integration" to denote a lack of social integration as well as a lack of consistent social control. They associated this with the suicide rate. Breed used a lack of a good marriage as an indicator of poor social integration and associated it with a high suicide rate.

What is found when suicide rates of women are related to these theories is that each study at least suggests that women have high suicide rates when social control is high. It is necessary, therefore, to develop theory which explains this relationship. It makes no sense to have different social theories for each sex. Sex is a biological variable and therefore cannot explain sociological phenomena. Researchers dichotomize by sex because data are available in that form. However, if one is to develop sociolgical theory, it is necessary to use sociological variables. The variables associated with different sex socialization and sex role patterns suggest a variety of ways suicide could be explained using what is known about male and female suicide rates. For example, using male and female as indicators

of high and low status groups can be very fruitful for developing a suicide theory. We sketch such a theoretical perspective here as a demonstration of how data are incorporated in a comprehensive sociological theory. The task is to explain different responses of high and low status people in different situations in order to understand why more high status people commit suicide.

We suggest that individuals who aspire to high status are likely to have in common the following characteristics: (1) They actively value positions of high status they hold. (2) They wish to believe that they deserve such positions. They do not wish to credit their high status to luck. They would rather credit their own characteristics as making them uniquely deserving of the position. (3) They have high self-esteem. The high status which society accords them, as well as their belief in their ability to be a high status person, is reflected in their high self-esteem. Personality characteristics associated with high status positions make failure to achieve high status very difficult to accept. Value of the position, combined with a belief that it is something in the nature of the self which gains the position, makes it necessary in the event of failure to admit their personal inadequacies as a cause of failure. This, in turn, makes it necessary to lower the level of self-esteem.

Individuals with low status, contrary to those with high status, are likely to have the following characteristics: (1) Low commitment to their position, that is, they value it only moderately. (2) Belief in luck, in fate, even in the caprice of society which has placed them in the position in which they find themselves. (3) They

do not feel that the position reflects their own personal worth; therefore, their esteem is less likely to be a reflection of their position or their ability to achieve the position. Although they may have respectable self-esteem, it is not based on, nor supported by, the esteem attached to their position. Thus, people in positions of low status have less concern for the specific goal, less investment of the self in reaching the goal, and more flexibility for changing goals if that becomes necessary.

Sex differences in the personality factors associated with high status positions are clearly documented in the research literature. First, males tend to value the masculine role earlier and more fully than females value the feminine role (Borstelmann, 1961; Brown, 1956; Hartley & Klein, 1959). Second, males are committed to a belief that they are themselves responsible for what they achieve (Rotter, 1966, Clifton and Lee, 1976). Third, males have higher self-esteem than women. (See, for example, Rudy, 1968).

In summary, we have hypothesized that three characteristics of the individual should make acceptance of one's assigned position in the social structure difficult to accept. First, if one highly values a position, loss of that position will be difficult. Second, if one believes a position is to be earned through his or her own efforts, there will be a sense of failure in losing the position. Third, if one's self-esteem stems from the position, there will be a loss of self-esteem. Such factors as intensity of commitment and length of time one is committed to the goal will also be important variables for predicting difficulty in accepting one's position. The

point is that this kind of theoretical approach, based on social psychological variables, has the ability to explain why men, who have high status, also have high suicide rates. It is the process of gaining and losing status that encourages or discourages suicide. This approach by the way, is compatible with Breed's (1967) theory of loss as a reason for suicide. Suicide rates of men and women differ, but not because men and women have differing reasons for commiting suicide. Rather, it is because men and women have different social status. There is research which directly or indirectly supports the approach suggested here. Breed's (1967) theory suggests that a loss of status is associated with suicide. Hamblin and Jacobsen (1972:104) in reanalyzing Maris's (1971) data, suggest that "it is the females who have had relatively sheltered lives...who are apparently defenseless and, hence, when their beneficient status is threatened in a major way actually commit suicide." Rushing (1969) and Miller (1967) use approaches which are compatible.

Nevertheless, the bulk of suicide theory is essentially where Durkheim left it and this in large part is because suicide rates of women have not been adequately understood. With a better understanding of women now available to suicide theorists, with more sophisticated knowledge of socialization of women, with more thorough knowledge of the status of women in the work force and in marriage, theorists should be able to develop a better understanding of female suicide. We can now gain new insights into suicidal behavior, and as a resu't, suicide theory should move beyond Durkheim.

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